

On Luck and Leadership



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LITHOGRAPH: The retreat of Napoleon from Russia, 3 November 1812. (Victor Adam)

AN ANCIENT TAOIST PARABLE, transmitted by a 13th century Japanese poet, tells the story of a Chinese farmer's son who falls off a horse and breaks his arm. "How unlucky the farmer is," his neighbors think as they pay their condolences. A year later, an army marches into the village and conscripts every able-bodied youth—except for the farmer's son, whose arm is useless. The army takes them all off to war, and they all die. The villagers wonder at how lucky the farmer is.¹

Napoleon Bonaparte once said he did not want to work with any generals unless they were lucky. He ignored experienced generals in his quest to find so-called lucky generals.²

I have often wondered how luck has factored into the success of military leaders. How many times in our careers as professional Soldiers have we heard individual officers described as being lucky? What is this thing called luck? In one instant, what appears to be bad luck suddenly becomes good. Is luck just a word we use to describe success or failure in the absence of any other explanation? Is luck something we can control? Is luck a question of probability or is it merely a fantasy?

Defining Luck

According to the *Merriam-Webster OnLine Dictionary*, one definition of luck is "the events or circumstances that operate for or against an individual."³ But what makes events or circumstances work for or against an individual? In *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*, Peter L. Bernstein explores the fascinating subject of risk and, to some extent, luck.⁴ His largely scientific approach examines decision theory, probability, and risk-taking, and he argues that "a decision should involve the strength of our desire for a particular outcome as well as the degree of our belief about the probability of that outcome."⁵ So for Bernstein, in testing luck or tempting fate, one's desire factors into a decision's outcome in some significant relation to one's reasoning about its likelihood.

Bernstein tells us that both strength of desire and level of experience should play major roles in determining the possible outcome of future events. Unfortunately, things are never that simple in military operations because the enemy's actions also influence outcomes. Therefore, we cannot take a purely scientific approach to the study of luck in the hope that some consistently reliable formula will materialize.

The word "luck" does not appear in the Army's most recent field manual (FM) on leadership, FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*. It occurred only twice in FM 6-22's predecessor, FM 22-100 (also titled *Army Leadership*)—once in a discussion on organizational leaders, where it states that "failing through want of experience or luck is forgivable"; the other, in an example used to illustrate implied missions.⁶ The old leadership FM seems to imply that, in the absence of success, an officer might claim bad luck as a plausible excuse. However, it does not recognize luck as a value, attribute, skill, or action officially associated with an officer in the U.S. Army. Nor does luck appear in the Army Leadership Framework (Be, Know, Do).⁷ This lack of recognition stems from the Army's and everyone else's inability to supply or prepare luck. By any definition, luck is not something quantifiable.

Many successful leaders in another field that involves fierce competition, sports, have discussed how luck affects success. Legendary Green Bay Packers football coach Vince Lombardi wrote that he never talked about luck with his players; he talked about preparation. He added, "Luck doesn't favor the lucky; it favors the prepared, and the difference between success and failure is player control."⁸ Lombardi's statement, backed up by his resounding record of success, suggests that preparation and control (of variables) are major contributors to outcomes that appear to be the result of luck.⁹

Another football icon, Darrell Royal, former head coach of the University of Texas, says that "luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." Although not all sports leaders share Lombardi's and Royal's views, we can conclude that two of the most successful football coaches in the United States thought or believe that they had a large degree of control over the amount of luck (or successful outcomes) they received. One can view

their experiences as paradigmatic for conditions in which two sides oppose each other.

Luck, then, appears to be influenced by a combination of confidence (desire, belief, and experience), control, preparation, and opportunity.¹⁰ Therefore, my definition of luck is *successful or unsuccessful outcomes that appear to result from the convergence of confidence, control, preparation, and opportunity*. (See figure 1.) Where and when these factors converge is usually where and when "good luck" occurs. The larger the total input of these factors, the more likely one is to experience good luck (i.e., success). Figure 2 shows what I call the good-luck curve. By maximizing the input of good-luck parameters, a leader stands a good chance of having good luck.

What About Bad Luck?

Sometimes, too much confidence works against a Soldier, and too many opportunities can lead to confusion. Also, we all know someone who has defied logic to achieve his objectives without much confidence, control, preparation, or opportunity. However, such cases are simply standard deviations or outliers.

What happens when opportunity is present, but the result is still "bad luck"? Is the cause a deficiency in some of the factors that lead to good luck, or can bad luck override even the best input? The



Figure 1. A model of the factors that influence "luck."

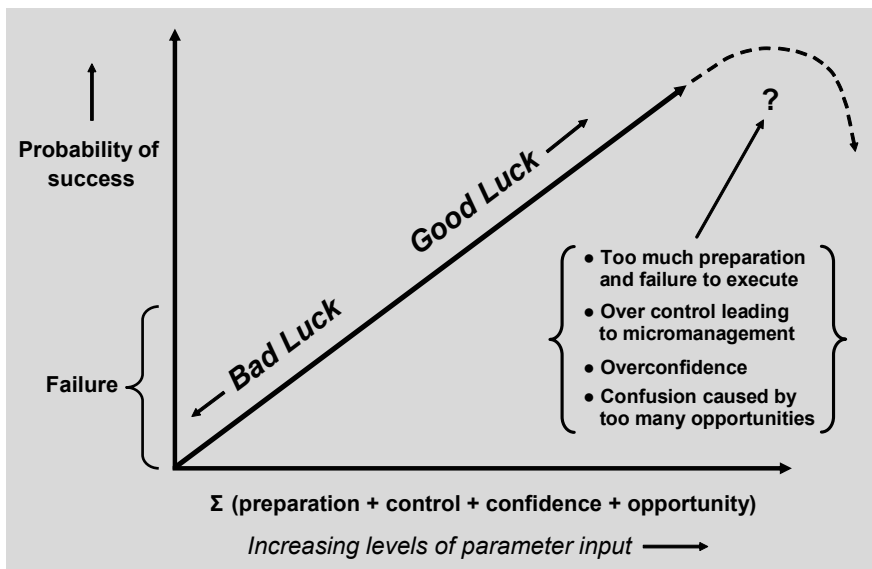


Figure 2: The good luck curve.

simple answer is that if we believe luck itself is an input, unpredictable outcomes will occur because luck is an unknown variable. My model does not regard luck as an input factor; it regards luck as *an indicator that the conditions necessary for good luck to occur were in place*. In battle, the best outcomes, or the greatest luck, will probably occur when all input factors are maximized. Good luck might also result if one or more enemy input factors are absent or only partially present. (In other words, good luck for one person might merely be the result of his capitalizing on the bad luck of another.)

Cases in Point: Napoleon, Custer, Lee

History records many battles won or lost because a leader failed to prepare the grounds for good luck. In *Makers of Modern Strategy*, Peter Paret tells us that Napoleon often misinterpreted enemy intentions or actions, misjudged the possibilities of his own troops, and—especially in later years—could be deceived by his hopes and gigantic ambitions.¹¹ By the time Napoleon decided to invade Russia, his desires, beliefs, and past successes had clearly made him overconfident. Overconfidence can remove good luck from one’s grasp. (See figure 2.) Napoleon caused his luck to run out when he invaded Russia, and it led to his defeat.

Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer’s defeat at Little Big Horn was another result of insufficient input. Custer erred in breaking up his regi-

ment into small units and scattering them so widely that he could not reassemble them when concerted action was required to avert disaster. Historian Edgar Stewart argues that the Indians won not because they employed an overmastering strategy, but because they simply took advantage of Custer’s mistakes.¹² Custer’s lack of preparation for this battle presented his opponents with an opportunity that materialized as good luck for them and bad luck for Custer. The Indians were prepared to take advantage of the opportunity and so were able to control the battle and defeat Custer.

This example shows that if one party is more confident, better prepared, and reacts to opportunity faster, luck will favor him.

In *As Luck Would Have It*, Civil War scholars Otto Eisenschiml and E.B. Long argue that if Confederate Major General J.E.B. Stuart had received clear instructions as to what General Robert E. Lee expected of him, the Battle of Gettysburg would probably have been fought at Cashtown, where Lee had an almost impregnable position.¹³ Stuart’s unnecessary attempt to ride around Union General Joseph Hooker’s army rendered Lee blind to the Union army’s whereabouts, forcing him to leave his excellent position at Cashtown and seek battle on less favorable terrain.¹⁴ The brilliant Lee was confident, in control, prepared, and awaiting the opportunity to defeat General George Meade at Cashtown, but Lee did not have control over one critical factor: Stuart’s actions.

Luck and Military Leadership

How does luck affect military leadership? According to FM 6-22, leadership is “influencing people—by providing purpose, direction, and motivation—while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization.”¹⁵ A military leader who wants good luck must have confidence and exercise control, and he must be prepared to exploit opportunities. Napoleon only wanted to work with lucky officers, and Soldiers like to go into battle with lucky leaders, but this puts the cart before the horse.

Luck is an outcome, good or bad; trying to evaluate it as a contributing factor makes no sense. Luck is not a factor that can have measurable effects on leaders, but *leaders can clearly affect the luck they experience*. Still, it is worth noting that when Soldiers perceive a leader to be lucky, the leader will likely have additional influence over them, and in this way the perception of luck will have second-order positive effects.

A Great Believer in Luck

Former U.S. President Thomas Jefferson reportedly said, "I'm a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more luck I have." The examples of luck I present here indicate that Bernstein, Lombardi, Royal, and Jefferson certainly knew what they were talking about. Good luck occurs when one is confident, in control of all or most variables, well prepared, and ready to exploit opportunities. A good leader experiences good luck not because he is lucky, but because he applies the factors in the good-luck model to set favorable conditions. Napoleon, who obviously did not understand this model, treated luck as a kind of innate personal attribute.

There will always be some uncertainty about the future, but while some are willing to leave things for the gods to decide, others will use the factors discussed here to chart their path toward success. Clearly, we should not use the phrase "good luck" to explain success or "bad luck" to describe failure

because these terms obscure or mystify otherwise knowable factors that contribute to success or failure. To me, good luck looks like something that is earned, and good leaders can affect the amount of luck they receive. Military professionals should heed this more practical explanation of luck and work to set the conditions for what might, post-battle or war, be attributed to luck. It behooves them to do so, for no taxpayer or politician will listen to a general who says, "We lost this battle because of bad luck." **MR**

NOTES

1. Ward Geddes, "The Old Man Po Sou's Horse; The Fu on the Old Man of Hsin Feng," in *Selected Anecdotes to Illustrate Ten Maxims of Religions of Japan in Practice*, ed. George J. Tanabe Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), <www.pupress.princeton.edu/chapters/s6649.html> (accessed 21 September 2007).
2. John Robert Seeley, *A Short History of Napoleon the First* (1900), <www.archive.org/details/ashorthistoryofn00seelmiss>; Jack Yoest, "Schoomaker: Unlucky General and Able Danger," *Reasoned Audacity*, <www.charmaineyoest.com/2005/10/schoomaker_unlucky_general_and.php> (accessed 21 September 2007).
3. Merriam-Webster OnLine, <www.m-w.com>.
4. Peter L. Bernstein, *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1996).
5. Ibid.
6. FM 22-100, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 31 August 1999), 5-9. FM 22-100's successor, FM 6-22, *Army Leadership* (October 2006) is available at <www.armystudyguide.com/content/publications/field_manuals/fm-611-army-leadership-co.shtml> (accessed 21 September 2007).
7. Ibid., 1-3, fig. 1-1.
8. Vince Lombardi Jr., *What It Takes To Be #1: Vince Lombardi on Leadership* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press Publishers, 2002), 29.
9. The reader should note that I am equating a lucky output with a successful outcome.
10. Because confidence is based on desire, belief, and experience, I refer to the three terms together as confidence.
11. Peter Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 128.
12. Edgar Stewart, *Custer's Luck* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 494.
13. Otto Eisenschimi and E.B. Long, *As Luck Would Have It: Chance and Coincidence in the Civil War* (Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1948), 67.
14. Ibid., 82.
15. FM 6-22, 1-2.

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